

Dear LUTSF

I am writing to you with my report after returning from my very exciting trip to the Austrian Alps. I travelled to the Alps to take part in a yoga teacher training course which lasted just one month. It was an opportunity to live within an ashram with a number of Swamis (monks) and learn the skills of teaching a good yoga asana (still posture) class. The unexpected and most beneficial surprise of the course was that it gave me the opportunity to see and experience first hand what it really means to be and live the life of a genuine yogi. It was an experience that has changed my life and I would encourage anyone to take on this very intensive, soul searching and character testing course. I began the course on 27th August and returned from the Alps on the 25th September 2005 with a Yoga Teacher Diploma. I also came away with a great insight about what is really important in life and how I want to incorporate these lessons in to my own life. I want to share this experience and encourage others to take the plunge and see how special the course really is. To understand why the yogic philosophy of life is so very important and absolutely beneficial for our busy western life style.

After training in the Graham Technique throughout my dance training I was well aware of the similarity between the Graham Style and the basic postures of Yoga (although the intention and quality of the movements are not comparable at all). It was this first experience in my dance career that led me to try my first yoga class. I loved Graham, so I must love yoga, right? Well, I was a young dancer with lots of energy, after my first yoga class I found it boring and had too much energy to bother with all that breathing. Yet as the years passed and my body became less resilient, I noticed that my interest in yoga started to grow. It became a great warm up for my body as I didn't always want to put my body through such an aggressive warm up like a Graham technique class. It was then that I began to understand the benefits and potential of the yoga art form, and how beneficial it can be for a dancer to help open up their body in a safe and progressive way. I plan to use my knowledge as both a dancer and yoga teacher to bring both styles together and create a class that will not only work the body and strengthen it, but to also relax and ease the body without force.

I feel the course has fulfilled all my expectations as I am now qualified to teach yoga but it has also exceeded my expectations. It has given me more opportunities to expand my abilities by teaching classes that are solely yoga based and to share some of the philosophical insights that I have gained, with others who are interested. I do not really have any advice to other awardees except plan your trip thoroughly and try to absorb as much of your trip as possible. Most of all, enjoy the experience and come back and share your adventures with others. I look forward to reading your future reports.

I have categorized my report in to six sub headings to give easy reference to the reader. The headings are: Introduction, Daily Schedule, Main Objectives For Taking The Course, Challenges of the Course, Achievements of the Course and My Final Thoughts. Thank you so much to The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship for funding the travel for my trip. Without you it really wouldn't have been possible. I hope you are able to carry on with such good work for many years to come.

Yours Sincerely

Amanda Weaver

REPORT: THE SIVANANDA YOGA VEDANTA CENTRE, YOGA TEACHER TRAINING COURSE

INTRODUCTION

Four days before I was due to depart on my adventure in to the Austrian Alps, I was watching the news to see that there had been huge floods in many countries in Europe. I sat there in disbelief as the newsreader listed the effected areas. I couldn't believe my bad luck when she mentioned that the tiny village of Rieth in Austria was experiencing severe floods and the road that led out of Rieth and up in to the Alps was completely flooded. This was the only access to the Sivananda Ashram and my heart began to sink. Out of all the places in the whole world, this small village had succumbed to a huge storm. The prospects of being able to reach the ashram any time soon looked very doubtful. I had waited almost a year to take this trip and as I watched the severity of the storm that was hitting many areas of Europe, my optimism sank as I began to think that the course maybe cancelled. The ashram kept in close contact with their possible students over the next few days, keeping us updated with any developments. To my surprise I received a phone call just the day before I was due to travel with great news. Due to the road being very steep, the water was able to drain away a lot faster than expected. All was back on again, I was definitely on my way.

After a short flight to Munich and a ride on a yogi bus up the beautiful alps of Austria, I finally arrived at the ashram at about 7pm on a Saturday evening. Day light was beginning to fade and with the darkness, came a huge thunder storm which seemed so close that we could reach out and touch it. It had been a dramatic start to the course and I remember feeling quite unsettled and overwhelmed at this point. I went to bed with an apprehensive feeling and one of great excitement. I didn't sleep a wink all night.

DAILY SCHEDULE

We were woken by a bell, one of those old fashioned hand bells. I opened my eyes and it was still pitch black. I glanced at the clock and it said 5.30 am. We had no time to wash and do all the normal girly preening that most of us do in the morning. By 6am all the trainee yogis had congregated in a huge hall, all sitting cross-legged in rows of eight, while four Swamis (monks) were sitting at the front of the hall on slightly raised platforms. They were also cross-legged with there eyes closed, their backs so straight and so very still. I sat there in awe at these gracious and elegant statue-like figures. As I sat in silence and gazed at these unusual and rare beings I began to feel slightly panicked. I started to question my abilities, should I be here, will I like the experience, am I good enough etc. All the usual doubts that you experience when trying something completely new. My fear soon vanished as I looked around at all the other students and noticed that their expressions also showed amazement and apprehension. So I calmed myself down and felt better with the thought that there is safety in numbers.

The morning sessions became known to me as '*Satsang*'. We would begin the *satsang* with 30 minutes of meditation, which for the first week was an absolute killer. I am used to muscle and joint pain from my dance career, but this, was something else. Your muscles begin to ache from sitting still for such long periods of time. The hip joints become excruciating as the weight of the knees pull the legs further out in the crossed legged position. We would spend between 5 to 8 hours a day in this position, during lectures and *satsang*. Meditation was then followed by 30 minutes of chanting and this became my favourite part of *satsang*. There were many new words to get used to but once you managed that, it became a very uplifting practice. You begin to meditate on sound. This was followed by a short lecture with one of the Swamis. A lot of the time the talks were based on Sivananda (The founder of the movement) and his life works. At other times the Swami would recap material from previous lectures which the group may have been struggling with. *Satsang* would then be closed by the chanting of the '*Arati*' (the closing prayer). The whole thing would take about 1 hour 45 minutes and the sun would just be up as we started our first *asana* class of the day at 8.00am and finished at 9.30am. By this stage I

would be absolutely starving and by 10am we would make our way to the dining area where we had 1/2 an hour to eat breakfast.

The delicious vegetarian breakfast was followed by Karma yoga (self service to others); this is a one-hour session where we are all given tasks around the ashram, such things as helping prepare food or gardening and general maintenance of the ashram. My job was to work in the boutique, a small shop that was crammed full of interesting oils, incense, books and such like. It really was a lovely way to spend my karma yoga sessions. I was very lucky with my given tasks, as others were not as content with theirs. Then from here we would all resume back in the hall for a one-hour *Kirtan* lesson (study of chanting and mantras), or a *Bhagavad Gita* session (study of the religious Sanskrit literature).

Next we would have an hour free to ourselves which, on the first day, we thought would be a time of relaxation, yet it wasn't so. Each day we had to hand in an essay from one of the main lectures from the previous day. It turned out that this was the only time to actually write up our notes. From 2 - 3.30 pm, we would all return to the main hall where we would have the main lecture. We would use this time to be guided through the subjects in the teacher training manual, ready for the final exam at the end of the course.

At 4pm we would go to our second and final *asana* class of the day. This time the class was used for the purpose of learning how to teach the *asanas* correctly. As the weeks progressed we split into small groups and taught sections of classes to each other. We were then marked on our performance. At 6pm we would have the second and last meal of the day. We only ate twice a day which took a lot of getting used to, especially when working so hard.

Finally, to finish off the day, we would return to the main hall and have the evening *satsang*. It would be exactly the same as the morning *satsang* but, instead of a lecture with one of the Swamis, there would be guest speakers from all round the world. Each speaker discussed many subjects from nutrition to music and dance. It was all very interesting but such a challenge to be sitting there cross-legged and so very tired. The day would be finished by about 10pm and we would have just enough time to take a shower and put the finishing touches to our essays before lights out at 10.30. You would close your eyes for what seemed like just 1 minute and then the bell would ring. It can't possibly be morning yet, but it always was. At the beginning it was really difficult and it did feel a lot like ground hog day. As time goes on the routine becomes easier and your body starts to recover from the instant detox that happens within the first week.

MY MAIN OBJECTIVES FOR TAKING THE COURSE

My reasons for taking this course began when I was doing a dance degree at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Leeds, many years ago. After training in the Graham Technique throughout my training I was well aware of the similarity between the Graham style and the basic yoga postures (although the intention and quality of the movements are not comparable at all). It was this first experience of my dance career that led me to try my first yoga class. I loved Graham, so I must love yoga, right? Well, I was a young dancer with lots of energy, and after my first yoga class I found it boring and had too much energy to bother with all that breathing. Yet as the years passed and my body became less resilient, I noticed my interest in yoga started to grow. It became a great warm up for my body as I didn't always want to put my body through such aggressive technique classes. It became an excellent substitute. It was during this time that I began to understand the benefits and potential of the yoga art form, and how beneficial it can be for a dancer, to help open up their bodies in a safe and progressive way. I plan to use my knowledge as both a dancer and yoga teacher to bring both styles together and create a class that will not only work on the body's strength but also relax and ease the body without force.

CHALLENGES OF THE COURSE

The main thing that I found so very difficult during the course was how much we had to learn during such a short space of time. From learning to teach a yoga class correctly to the philosophy of yoga, anatomy and physiology, the *bhagavad gita*, *chakras*, *kundilini yoga*, diet and nutrition and many other subjects, all ready for our final three-hour exam. We never had a minute to our selves, the schedule was so tight that the minute you finished one class, you were on your way to another. It really was a great test of character and willpower to fight your natural reactions to tiredness such as snappiness and impatience. Some dealt with it better than others. It was very interesting and a great lesson to observe others in times of difficulty and how they responded. We all seemed to have patterns that we slipped into when put under pressure. This course taught us how to let go of those patterns and helped us to find our true selves and not who we have been programmed to be.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE COURSE

I initially went on the trip to learn this ancient art form from a prime source, which was immensely valuable. The unexpected and most beneficial surprise of the course was that it gave me the opportunity to see and experience first hand what it really means to be and live the life of a genuine yogi. It was an experience that has changed my life and I would encourage anyone to take on this intensive, soul searching and character-testing course. I came away with a Yoga Teacher Diploma and a great insight about what is really important in life and how I want to incorporate these lessons into my own life. I want to share this experience and encourage others to take the plunge and see how special the course really is. To understand why the yogic philosophy of life is so very important and absolutely beneficial for our busy western life style. It has given me more opportunities to expand my abilities by also teaching classes that are solely yoga based and I want to share some of my philosophical insights that I have gained, with others who are interested.

I didn't just learn the western version of yoga (the *asanas* only) but also all aspects of yoga, I mainly learned that yoga is a way of life and isn't just for an hour a week. It can be adopted into every aspect of our lives, from the food we eat to the way we communicate with others. Every act and action is important and no task is too menial.

My final thoughts: the Swamis

The main belief of the Swamis in this life is to serve others and help others in any way they can. They are the most compassionate and giving people I have ever met. It is this attitude that truly makes them a breed of their own. It is easy to see and feel that they are truly spiritual people and their humble nature is something we can all learn a lot from. It really opens your heart to live in their presence for a while. They have a vast knowledge that they willing share with others, to help each individual reveal what is really important in life: to serve others and give to others.